

Responding to God
A Sermon on Matthew 4:12-23 by the Rev. Philip Major
St. Paul's ~ Syracuse, NY ~ January 25, 2026

This has not been an easy week for us. We are going to find our strength where we always find our greatest strength: in the Good News of God's love, especially as it has been given to us in Christ Jesus. Today's Gospel passage is especially helpful for us. Let's spend some time digging a little deeper into our Gospel.

When Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to the north, back to the region called Galilee. Galilee is the region where Jesus grew up. Bethlehem and Nazareth were two of the small towns in the region of Galilee. Nazareth, his mother's hometown, and the place where he lived as a boy, was home to just a few hundred people at the time.

Isaiah calls this region 'Galilee of the Gentiles' because it's more or less on the border with the Gentile regions along the coast and to the north. Galilee might be a good place for Jesus to begin his ministry, because this is home territory for him. Galilee is also a good place for Jesus to begin his work because it's just about as far away as he could get from leaders of the church in Jerusalem.

Jesus visited his mother Mary in Nazareth, then he *left his mother and made his home in a larger town at the crossroads by the sea of Galilee, Capernaum, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: "Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea of Galilee, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles--the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned."*

The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and let's remember they were Jewish. Matthew reminds us that the message Jesus is giving is continuous with the message of Isaiah and the rest of the Hebrew prophets. The first people to see the light were the Jews, and the first people to respond to the call of Jesus were some Jewish fishermen: Peter, Andrew, James and John.

From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent and return to God, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." As Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea-- for they were fishermen. And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

Peter, Andrew, James and John responded to Jesus' call to them. We can tell they responded with strength and conviction, because they stopped in the middle of their work and followed Jesus immediately.

This is the main point of the passage. Being a disciple of Jesus means being responsive to the questions God is asking us. Being a disciple of Jesus means responding when God shows us some work that needs to be done.

This is one of the reasons I was glad to come to St. Paul's Church, ten years ago, to serve as your priest. In different ways, with a variety of words and actions, the people of St. Paul's are constantly responding to God's call to us.

Forty-five years ago, God showed this congregation some work that needed to be done. People were hungry and there was no place for people who had run out of money to get a decent meal. So, with other churches, St. Paul's created the Samaritan Center. For the first thirty-five years the Samaritan Center operated out of St. Paul's Church building, and we still support it today. The people of St. Paul's responded to God's call to them.

Twelve years ago, Becky Livengood, David Ridings, Doug Mouncey, Betsy Elkins, Tom

Cantwell and a bunch of others could see it was once again time for St. Paul's to be responsive to the needs of people in our city. We can tell they responded with strength and conviction, because they started a piece of work that was so large, the finishing touches are being completed right now, twelve years later. Becky, David, Doug, Betsy, Tom and others understood that God has given us a great gift, which is that we have been given these buildings to use for God's purposes here, in a place where they are most useful, at the center of Syracuse.

Twelve years ago, Becky, David, Doug, Betsy, Tom and others understood that it is our responsibility as Christians to respond to the needs of God's people using the resources we've been given. So they started a process that culminated in \$2.5 million worth of renovations to St. Paul's. These renovations have been given the name *Open Doors*.

These renovations were made possible by the responsiveness of our members. Each member of St. Paul's was invited to contribute to *Open Doors*, and God worked a little miracle among us, because our members contributed more than \$1.2 million to the effort. The people of St. Paul's respond with strength and conviction like Peter, Andrew, James and John in the Gospel of Matthew. We are responding to God's call to us.

The successful completion of *Open Doors* has now made it possible for St. Paul's to respond with renewed strength and conviction to God's call to us in 2025 and 2026. In 2025 we responded by creating a 25-year lease with *A Tiny Home for Good*, which gives them use of our new handicapped accessible entrance on Montgomery Street, and the new elevator, and the second floor of our parish house. We're giving these to *A Tiny Home for Good* free of charge because that's what Jesus asks us to do. Jesus asks us to be responsive and to be generous.

Responsiveness is a way of life for us as Jesus' disciples. About ten days ago I was working with a group of leaders of churches from around the city to organize a response to the killing of an unarmed woman by ICE agents in Minneapolis. We decided to respond by organizing a prayer service and candlelight vigil on the Martin Luther King holiday.

Then one week ago, on Sunday afternoon, the other pastors and I were trying to respond to a new challenge. We were looking at the weather forecast for the Martin Luther King holiday, and it looked ominous. It would be cold and very windy. This was a problem, because the candlelight vigil and prayer service we had organized was supposed to be held outside, down the street in front of the Roman Catholic Cathedral.

The cold, windy weather forced us to resort to 'plan B', which was to hold the candlelight vigil indoors, at St. Paul's. So, last Sunday afternoon, I sent an email to the leaders of the various teams and to members of the Vestry, asking for volunteers to help welcome people to St. Paul's for the vigil, and to help set-up and clean-up afterwards. You know what happened next. At least ten people wrote back to me, volunteering to help. More than a dozen people from St. Paul's showed up an hour early, Monday at 4:30. They did everything that was needed. They responded to the call. An hour after they arrived, two hundred people were sitting in the pews at St. Paul's, holding candles, singing songs, and listening to the words of Martin Luther King in the candlelight.

Responsiveness is a way of life for us as Jesus' disciples. Some people struggle with being responsive. Sometimes people are cynical and say, "It won't make any difference for me to help." But you won't find many cynical people at St. Paul's.

So today I give thanks for the privilege of being able to walk alongside all of you as we respond to God's call to us. We are like Peter, Andrew, James and John. We do not know exactly where God is leading us. We are just trying to follow the one we call the Lord of Love.